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ABSTRACT

The economic upswing in Central and Eastern Europe can be achieved only with a skilled work force. In view of the traditional exemplary reputation of its dual system of vocational training, attention is being directed toward Germany. The dual system differs from that of other countries in that not only the state determines which qualifications may be provided. The requirements are defined by practice itself. The German economy finances the practical training of skilled workers in an amount three times greater than that which the state makes available for training at vocational schools. This personal interest on the part of the economy presumes a well-functioning economy capable of bearing the basic costs of such training. Various transitional forms are possible. The training and further training of skilled workers in Germany is focused on the practical teaching content provided on the job. This should not, however, be confused with semiskilled production jobs into which some countries place students. In Germany, the state regulates the framework in which the economy operates. Germany enjoys the lowest level of youth unemployment of all industrial countries. The training personnel sector plays an important role. Germany is supporting the reform processes in Central and Eastern Europe through counseling in vocational training reform and the creation of statutory foundations; support for model training centers; qualification assistance; and international activities. (YLB)

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The development of vocational training in Central and Eastern Europe

German experience in demand

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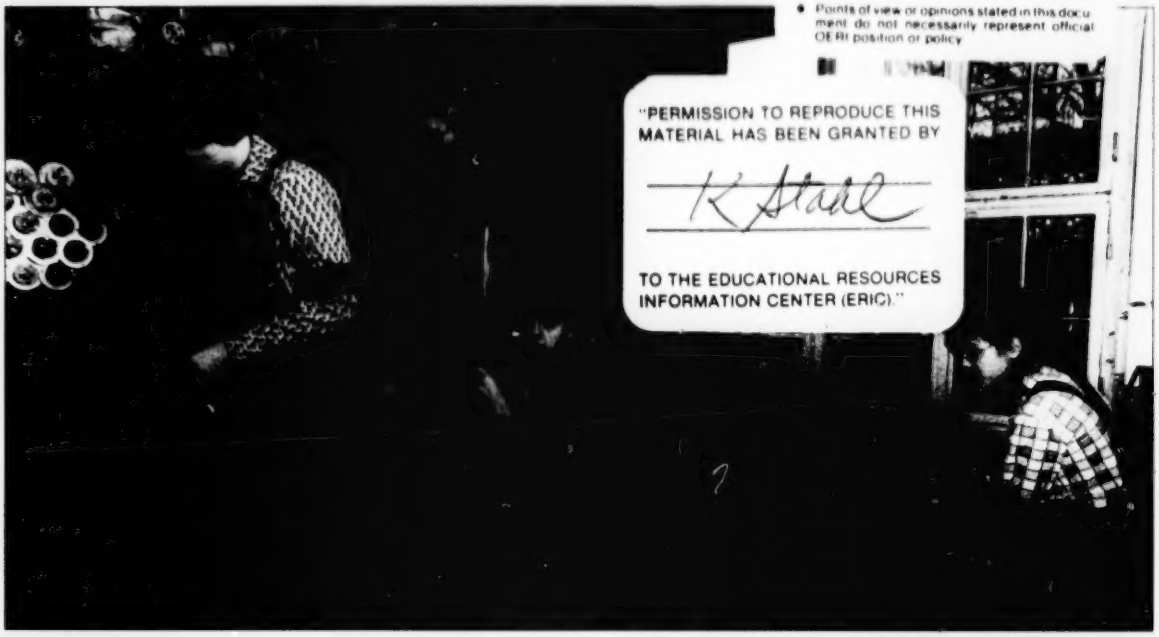

Is German vocational training suitable as a model for the transformation process in Eastern Europe? Polytechnical training at a company workshop in Leipzig.
Photo: Hermine Oberück

Rarely in the past have so many people in Europe been subjected to such radical changes to their circumstances as those taking place in the reform countries of Eastern Europe at the present time. For the majority, the whole framework of a seemingly safe – or at least regulated – world has collapsed. In this context, the demand is often made to slow down the reform processes to gain time for orientation. But the pace cannot be checked. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the "Iron Curtain", the East European states have been caught up in the maelstrom of international competition. A structural pattern is rapidly required for all sectors of society to counteract destabilization. In addition, in the final analysis, what people in these countries want is to catch up with the living conditions they experience elsewhere.

Economic upswing, however, can only be achieved in conjunction with a skilled and managerial staff of a high professional standard. Consequently, in view of the current international economic situation and social processes, it is only logical that attention is being focused on this key sector everywhere. This applies just as much to the USA as it does to the European Union states and, in particular measure, to the East European reform countries. The main reasons for this are:

- the economic development of each country concerned depends very much on the professional knowledge and skills of mid-level specialists; firms need qualified managerial staff to make the necessary free-market decisions;

- in view of international economic relations, a high standard of production technologies and expert services is required for the whole of an integrating Europe;

- the higher the specialist standard of the workforce, the greater the protection against unemployment and the greater the provision of opportunities for subsequent further employment;

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● firms will be faced with new tasks. They are engaged in commercial and technical-industrial branches in which electronic data processing will become increasingly important. They will be using new control techniques and introducing or creating new internal sectors of responsibility (marketing, accounting, management). They must be provided with the required professional qualifications to this end;

● financial support for a large number of unemployed persons is non-productive and costs the state more than the financing of vocational further training.

Young persons need good career prospects on leaving school.

Photo: Hermine Oberück

In view of the traditional exemplary reputation which the dual system of vocational training continues to enjoy worldwide, attention is being directed towards Germany, the western neighbour. In this context, the cardinal question is how far German vocational training is suitable as a model for the transformation process in Eastern Europe. To this must be added the fact that Germany is the only country boasting the necessary concrete experience of restructuring a planned to a social market economy.

True, this experience was not always gained systematically because it reacted to prevailing requirements. With one fell swoop, a compactly organized system collapsed and, to this day, a considerable number of persons who became jobless as a result still cannot be re-employed in jobs corresponding to their level of training. Yet, despite all setbacks, which are inevitable in such a process, compared with the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, development in Eastern Germany was plannable. There was a common language and mentality, the new start was backed by gigantic transfer payments and a complete legal system with all its necessary implemental structures introduced. This included the fact that, as far as standard was concerned, training qualifications obtained in the former GDR were recognized as equal to those in West Germany.

This, however, cannot disguise the fact that even though the training of GDR skilled workers was recognized as good, it often fell short of market-economy and countless technical requirements. The fundamental importance which workers themselves in the ex-GDR attach to their vocational training is shown by the fact that, within the space of a few years, every second employee has, by means of qualification measures, prepared himself for new or completely different vocational requirements. Following the collapse of large industrial sectors, new opportunities emerged in the market economy in the service professions, in commerce and the handicrafts – which are regarded as the engine of current development.

In contrast to these experiences gained in the ex-GDR, there are several states in Eastern Europe – such as the Russian Federation – in which other paths must be followed simply because in these countries the crafts, for example, have, by tradition, not played a major role. Professional achievements, which are linked with personal initiative, imagination and manual skill in the West, have almost come to be regarded there as work of an inferior nature. Yet it is small businesses of this type which are in a position to react quickly to economic changes and satisfy the wishes of customers, particularly in out-and-out shortage sectors, such as in the construction and renovation of dwellings, the repair of motor vehicles, the manufacture of furniture and office furnishings or in the clothing industry. Businesses of this type in West Germany – not the few major companies – account for 70% of the economic strength. In turn, two-thirds of such firms – employing fewer than 500 persons – train some 70% of all skilled junior staff, with a clear emphasis on the handicrafts.

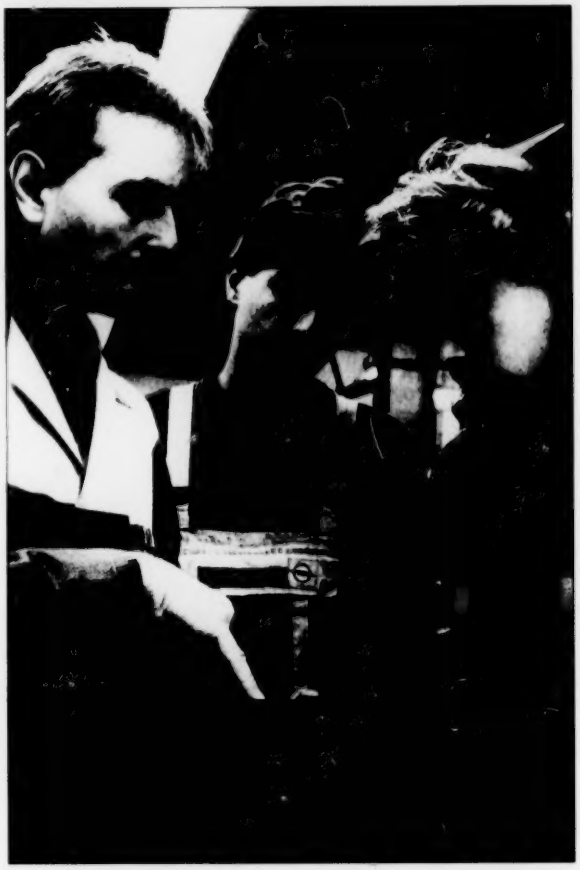
The governments of the East European states, which would similarly like to realize rapid reforms and innovations in the training and continued training sector, are often confronted with extremely difficult problems. After all, it is this sector in particular which has been affected by a large number of changed basic conditions which blur the contours:

● Seen from the point of view of society as whole, there is a close relationship between economic policy, on the one hand, and labour and social policy, on the other. Neither of these sectors can be purposefully advanced without taking the other into consideration. This results in a difficult tightrope walk between radical reforms and preserving structures capable of survival.

● Within the education sector, the training of skilled staff is institutionally coordinated with other educational paths in the school and higher education sectors. This relationship between general anct practical vocational training must be redefined content-wise.

● In the first phase of the new start, reforms could often only be realized by means of financial programmes. In the years ahead, more and more states will be faced with the task of developing a trend-setting statutory framework. Inter alia, this includes regulations concerning training, standards for the contents of recognized training occupation, as well as taxation advantages for education measures and investments.

● The provision of new vocational qualifications is "left hanging in mid-air" if there is no demand for these skills. Consequently, they must be coordinated with the regional labour market. Here, a corresponding overview, and, in particular, systematic counselling by employment services and job centres are purposeful.



70% of a young persons' year group choose dual vocational training in Germany.

Photo: M. Vollmer

● Unfavourable infrastructural conditions hamper free-market activity. Credit allocation still fails to function quite often, the tax load is too heavy, there are not enough suitable sites available. The firms' technical equipment is frequently obsolete, there are sub-contractor problems with regard to component parts. There are also not enough chambers and trade associations to provide advice and represent interests.

The difficult economic state of a large number of firms, which prevents new staff being taken onto the payroll, does not represent a rewarding basis for educational motivation as far as jobless persons are concerned. In this situation, state support, even though minimal, or activity in a "moonlight economy" are more realistic alternatives.

Young persons who have completed school also need new prospects. Practical vocational training without a course of studies or successful attendance of an institute did not enjoy particular prestige in the former socialist countries. Anyone deciding on a training trade in the manfacturing sector was often associated with learning difficulties or problems of another nature. Firms state they have too many "other worries" at present to concern themselves with the training of young skilled workers. And, indeed, the question is frequently being asked whether older employees should be dismissed in favour of the promotion of junior staff.

As a result, many young persons prefer to earn their money with casual work without having to make any strenuous efforts beforehand. The instructors, whose job it is to acquaint young persons with modern professional requirements, are themselves caught up in the new further training processes. The absence of the numerous types of former state support which increases the costs of training does not particularly motivate employers to plan perspectively and to remind themselves that this younger generation will decisively help to shape economic development within the space of a few years.

In this situation, the dual system of German vocational training is attracting the interest of the reformers. Admittedly, it is an undeniable fact that the structure is often difficult for outsiders to grasp, something which has to be seen in its historical correlations and which has been further developed in the present-day federal state. Even so, the German vocational training system contains a number of characteristic elements which can be transferred to other countries and display the strong points which have proved successful in long years of practice. The yardstick in this connection should be the focal points which have crystallized at the present time in Central and East European states:

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Political acceptance

The dual system differs from that of other countries by dint of the fact that not only the state determines which qualifications may be provided. The requirements are defined by practice itself; representatives of the employers and trade unions are involved in the laying down of training contents from the outset. This has proved to be a great advantage with regard to later application in working life. This aspect is also of importance for the countries of Eastern Europe to guarantee the acceptance of reforms on a broad basis.

The personal responsibility of the economy

The German economy finances the practical training of skilled workers to the tune of DM 26 billion annually. This is three times the figure which the state makes available for theoretical training at vocational schools. In comparison with other countries, these figures show that the responsibility differs from the vocational training in other countries which is more scholastic and conducted according to state-decreed regulations. This personal interest on the part of the economy in the training of skilled workers presumes – much more than the hitherto standard training of a scholastic nature in socialist countries – a well-functioning economy capable of bearing the basic costs of such training. On the other hand, of course, various transitional forms are possible which, among other things, can be practised in conjunction with the restructuring of the former GDR. The state, for instance, provides financial assistance for qualification centres outside firms for which the former vocational training schools at the combines can be used. This, in the first instance, is a flexible solution to build up a network of professions which are in particular demand in various regions and to enable the economy to assume greater financial responsibility. As far as development in Eastern Europe is concerned, the deliberations embodied in this fluid transition are important because they can help ease the state's financial burden and, at the same time, represent an increasing guarantee for the practicality and applicability of the qualifications provided.

State framework regulations

The training and further training of skilled workers in Germany is focused on the practical teaching content provided on the job. This is based on the conviction that the firms themselves are in the best position to know which skilled staff they need for particular jobs and that they consequently have a personal interest in training junior staff. Otherwise employers would be obliged to take on the school leavers left to them by the state. It is only through the constant innovations emanating from the well-trained junior staff entering firms that the latter can survive in a market economy. The practical training provided one or two days a week is supplemented by attendance of a vocational school to provide the necessary theoretical foundations.

In this connection, this often results in two basic misunderstandings in countries with a traditional vocational school training system. On the one hand, systematic on-the-job practical training is occasionally confused with the customary semi-skilled jobs in those countries in which vocational school pupils are put into the production process where, however, they are only allowed to operate in a narrow working sector. On the other hand, the fact is overlooked that this form of principally on-the-job vocational training in Germany enjoys considerably greater prestige than in other countries where theoretical training is considered to be the "more valuable" component.

In Germany, the state only regulates the framework in which the economy operates. The exceptions only apply to those groups of persons who are unable to exploit their chances on the labour market independently, such as unemployed persons, those threatened with unemployment, socially disadvantaged persons and women who return to the labour market after a break in their career. There are special state-financed supporting measures for these groups.

One of the prior commitments of state training policy is to guarantee nationally applicable standards (training statutes) which make employment possi-

Good instructors are an important factor in the innovation of a company.

Photo: Hermine Oberück

ble beyond individual firms, thus promoting mobility. The statutory requirements simultaneously form the framework for additional regulations which make allowance for regional or special in-plant requirements and which can be supplemented accordingly.

Marginal unemployment among youth

Of all the industrial countries, particularly in the European Union, Germany has the lowest level of youth unemployment. This stems from the fact that the economy is more ready to train young persons and to then take them onto the payroll, the greater influence the employers are able to exert beforehand on the standard of training. In Germany, around 70% of young persons from a year group choose a dual vocational training course which, in its practical orientation, corresponds to their preferences in accordance with their age. And even as far as the remaining 30%, who move onto university on completion of their secondary education, are concerned, a dual vocational training course – according to the prevailing standards in Germany – is an attractive proposition. Over one-third of them, for example, complete a financial training course at a bank or learn another commercial profession because this can even prove to be advantageous to courses of study.

The pilot schemes in Central and Eastern Europe so far show that young persons who qualified according to dual training plans in recent years, quickly discovered professional prospects.

The young generation will play a decisive part in economic and social development in a few years.

Photo: M. Vollmer

Training staff

The quality of training skilled workers at mid-level not only depends on questions of content; first and foremost it depends on the competence of the training personnel. By tradition, this sector plays an important part in Germany. Good instructors are a major factor for in-plant innovation. After all, the better skilled staff are trained, the better the goods they produce which attracts the interest of purchasers.

As a rule, the teachers in German vocational schools have also had practical training. Accordingly, the master craftsmen in the crafts and in industry desirous of training young persons practically, must produce special proof of their ability, including sound theoretical knowledge of their particular trade. Over and above this, they must be familiar with legal matters, occupational safety, the endangerment of the environment through manufacturing processes, and many other things. In this way they can provide young persons with knowledge extending beyond their individual jobs. On completion of their training, the young persons are not examined by their instructors but by independent and neutral commissions – which simultaneously represent a quality control of the training personnel.

Development of new infrastructures

One great obstacle for the modern qualification of young persons – as well as adult employees – lies in the fact that the training centres in East European countries do not, as a rule, correspond to today's technical requirements, or that, during the restructuring process of the combines,

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they were shut down as nonproductive components. Consequently, pilot centres are currently being set up in all those countries which, by means of practical on-the-job training and further training, include firms in the new specialist and technical developments and support the vocational schools.

Such industrial centres, commercial training offices, simulated technological firms and institutes for staff development now exist in different places. They asssume qualification commitments which still exceed the capabilities of training firms. Consequently, this results in purposeful cooperation with the regional economy which, in turn, promotes regional development.

The required infrastructure for modernization measures includes the representation of the economy's interests, such as the chambers, advice facilities such as job centres. Such institutions are indispensable for the acceleration of the economic development of a region and the simultaneous undertaking of the necessary steps towards a market economy.

German counselling

The Federal Republic of Germany is accompanying the reform processes in Central and Eastern Europe with great idealistic and financial commitment. In various focal-point sectors there are intensive and coordinated contacts between the governments concerned to organize counselling as effectively as possible.

Following a more general exchange of experience on the requirements involved in the vocational training of skilled workers and the vocational training systems in the initial stages, this cooperation has rapidly developed into systematic help towards self-help. Even though the focal points differ, it is taking shape according to uniform criteria in the following sectors in all the countries concerned:

- Counselling in vocational training reform and the creation of statutory foundations

Cooperation takes place by dispatching experts, holding seminars and providing material. The structural reforms of vocational training are being introduced via basic legislation, training regulations and new administrative responsibilities.

- Support for model, forward-looking training centres

By means of commercial and industrial-technical training centres, innovative points of departure in the reorganization of – preferably – practice-oriented training occupations are being created which are tailored to the requirements of a market economy. This is being accompanied by the setting up of administration schools for state decision-makers. Support is taking place in the form of development planning, qualification of staff, preparation of curricula and teaching material and the provision of selected teaching and learning aids. In this way, it will also be possible for the countries concerned to implement training measures themselves, thus developing new initiatives on the spot. The current focal points include commercial training, the motor-vehicle trades, heating and domestic engineering. Overall, data processing and computer-controlled engineering are acquiring special importance. Model centres for the occupational rehabilitation of handicapped persons constitute a further major focal point.

- Qualification assistance for multipliers in vocational training in selected sectors

The target groups are, first and foremost, the heads of vocational training centres, instructors and teachers in vocational training schools and firms, administration specialists and skilled staff in key positions. By means of its own promotion programme, support is being given to the privatization of small and medium-sized businesses in which practical knowledge about the founding and management of such enterprises is provided. The occupations mainly affected are to be found in the commercial sector, the industrial-technical sector, agriculture, the services industry and the management in small and medium-sized businesses.

- Promotion of partnerships between training and continued training institutions

Within the sector of the major German handicraft, industrial, commercial and savings-bank organizations, there is a large number of fruitful relations between chambers, firms and other institutions and East European partner institutions. In addition, there are several hundred town-twinnings. In this way, expertise can be exploited in many sectors and innovative steps taken to enhance the efficiency of East European institutions.

- International activities

Within the framework of pan-European and international initiatives designed to support young democracies in the education and training sector, the Federal Government has committed itself in diverse bodies and supporting programmes, such as UNESCO, OECD, European Union, Council of Europe, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank.

Outlook

The results achieved so far and existing cooperative relations are a positive sign for the reshaping of the economic and education/training systems in the Central and East European states. Viewed at this level, vocational training policy is making a substantial contribution to the development of forward-looking democratic societies and mutual understanding between neighbours in Eastern and Western Europe. To quote the Russian proverb: if two persons share an apple, each has a half, but if they share their thoughts, each person has twice as much. ❐

Michael Schlicht